

R 291535Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY BUJUMBURA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1752
INFO AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM
AMEMBASSY KAMPALA
AMEMBASSY KIGALI
AMEMBASSY NAIROBI

UNCLAS BUJUMBURA 000523

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BURUNDI STRIKES OUT: TEACHERS WALK, NURSES MAY FOLLOW

¶1. Burundi's secondary school teachers went on strike September 28, joining primary school teachers who have been on strike since September 18, to demand a salary increase and harmonization of their pay scales with other government employees. The Minister of Civil Service asked the teachers to be patient, citing Ministry of Finance claims that the USD 46 million needed to harmonize salaries simply didn't exist (the government having budgeted only USD 10 million for this purpose). The Secondary School Teachers' Union (known by its French acronym CONAPES) insisted that its members would not return to work until their demands are satisfied.

¶2. The roots of the current dispute go back several years. The previous government ended a prolonged work stoppage in 2003 by promising to augment and regularize teachers' pay. This agreement has yet to be implemented. Current President Nkurunziza rubbed salt in the wound shortly after his 2005 election by increasing the salaries of magistrates and policemen by a rumored 300-400 percent -- creating a multi-tier civil service that continues to fester with resentment. This has led to recurrent strikes in other sectors such as health, which was paralyzed by a series of doctors' and nurses' strikes in the first half of 2009. The nurses have threatened to strike again in the near future.

¶3. Civil society organizations, the Students' Parents Association, traditional leaders, and even the President's own Economic and Social Council have all called on the government to implement an impartial and transparent salary scale across the civil service. Since prospects for short term relief seem dim, strike activity is expected to continue.

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